

2 Why be a reflective practitioner?

Think about educators you admire. Have you noticed that the best teachers are confident in their own skills and at the same time open to change? Like effective professionals in any field, good teachers strive continuously to get better at what they do. As a teacher, you're a partner in the development of each child you work with. Shouldn't you think of yourself as a work in progress as well?

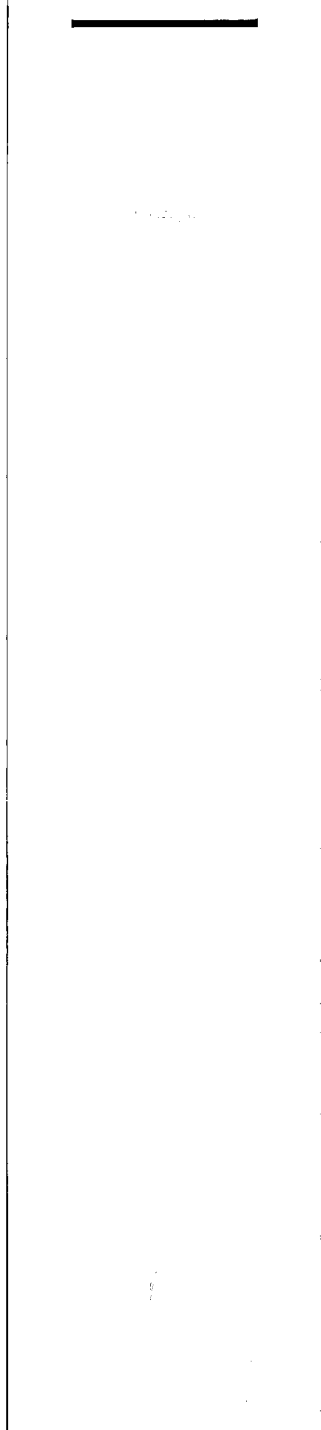
As a partner in children's development along with the children themselves, other educators, families, whānau and communities, you are in a powerful position. Being open to change will enable you to grow, learn and develop while you work with children to support them to grow, learn and develop. Reflective practice is a valuable tool in this process.

Choosing to be a reflective practitioner is a positive choice to make for your own development. Choosing not to reflect can lead you to teach from habit rather than responding to the needs of children and the early childhood setting as they arise. Reflection allows you to incorporate new theories and perspectives into your practice. Early childhood education is a dynamic field to work in, and you need to reflect on practice to incorporate change.

There are many reasons why you may not want to reflect: no time, feelings of powerlessness, lack of confidence in your own practice, lack of belief that others would want to support your initiatives, issues that are too big or difficult to contemplate. Excuses can always be found. Time should not be an issue, as you can write as little or as much as you like. The important thing is for you to have given some constructive thought to your actions. Sometimes it may seem you can do nothing to make a difference but one small action on your part could help to make teaching more meaningful and enjoyable for you.

Example

Jane is the supervisor of a new centre. The owner of the centre, Pat, is very hands on, and knows exactly how she wants things done and what Jane should do. If Jane suggests another strategy Pat responds quite aggressively. This is difficult for Jane to cope with, and inappropriate in front of the children. Jane reflects on ways that she can bring about some of the changes that she wants to happen. She notes that she often raises new ideas in the middle of a session, which may be unsettling for Pat. She decides to note issues that she has and raise them with Pat at their weekly meeting so that they can discuss them without other pressures on them. Organising an agenda that gives Pat some warning of topics for discussion gives Pat time to prepare her responses.



Building from a useful foundation: the sociocultural approach

From the 1960s through to the early 1990s, early childhood education theory and practice focused on a Piagetian model of the child as an autonomous learner, freely exploring the world in his or her own way and at his or her own level. The educator's role was to supervise and support that learning. In free play programmes, children were to choose activities for themselves, while educators intervened as little as possible, acting as resources rather than as participants (Smith 1998).

The rediscovery of Vygotsky's work, however, initiated a change in educators' thinking towards a sociocultural approach to learning and teaching. Like Piaget, Vygotsky believed that personal experience has a role in children's learning but he argued that learning also has an important social dimension from which personal experience is inseparable. As Mooney (2000) explains:

The world children inhabit is shaped by their families, communities, socioeconomic status, education, and culture. Their understanding of this world comes, in part, from the values and beliefs of the adults and other children in their lives. Children learn from each other every day. They develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak and listen to each other.

Influenced by this perspective, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996b), *Quality in Action / Te Mahi Whai Hua – Implementing the Desirable Objectives and Practices in New Zealand Early Childhood Services* (Ministry of Education 1998a) and most early childhood literature now have a sociocultural focus. An underlying assumption is that the child and educator are both active participants in learning in social contexts. Working together, they draw on each other's knowledge, skills and abilities to develop understanding. Because children learn through action and interaction with others, the educator must be actively involved with children in ways that will support their learning.

Similar to the Piagetian view, from a sociocultural perspective play makes a major contribution to learning. Vygotsky argued that play allows children to use language, create their own make-believe situations, talk over different roles and objectives, learn from one another and, in so doing, construct knowledge (Mooney 2000). Thus a child's interactions with adults and other children are key to the learning process.

By reflecting on their actions, educators can assess whether they are supporting children's learning in the most appropriate ways. This reflective process has become integral to the teaching role partly because a sociocultural focus positions all learners as active participants in understanding what they are experiencing. Active learning – and active teaching – rely on the use of reflective practice.



Reflection

*Does your teaching practice follow a Piagetian or sociocultural perspective? In reflecting on this question, you may find Smith's **Understanding Children's Development** (1998) helpful. Smith first discusses the change in emphasis from Piaget's to Vygotsky's views, before outlining a sociocultural approach to learning and development. See the bibliography in this book for further publications on sociocultural perspectives.*

Deconstructing and growing through critical reflection

Reflective practice is about getting to know yourself as an educator. It encourages you to look at your actions and ask 'is this the best way?', and make informed decisions about what is appropriate and effective in early childhood education.

In reflecting critically on your teaching, you acknowledge that performance can always be developed and improved. Critical reflection does not mean 'finding something wrong'. Rather, it means learning to identify both strengths and weaknesses, building on those strengths and overcoming the weaknesses.

Critical reflection can be seen as *deconstructing* an event, or examining what factors led to a particular event. The term should not be confused with *destruction* of the event, which means merely highlighting what was wrong. It is important to acknowledge strengths.

In the process of deconstruction you first identify the different parts or 'pieces' involved in the event itself, in the lead-up to the event, and in the consequences of the event. You then apply the skills of reflection to put these deconstructed pieces back together in ways that help you find new meanings and reach new understandings. In this way you can use any event to teach yourself about what to keep doing, what to change and what not to do.

When you see an event in a different light by reflecting on your teaching practice, you can start to make sense of it. You are able to explain experiences and relate them to professional knowledge. You become an effective learner from your experiences, and come to know and develop yourself as a professional.

Reflection

*What teaching strategies do you use when working with children? In reflecting on your teaching style, you may find it helpful to refer to **Techniques for Teaching Young Children** by MacNaughton and Williams (1998) or other teaching styles and strategies guides in the bibliography.*

has identified key advantages of being a reflective practitioner in

improving your skills as an educator through your openness to changing and
developing professionally

gathering a range of tools that will support your quest for continuous improvement,
including the skills, knowledge, attitudes and experiences of yourself and of
others, along with research, theories and models

building on the valuable foundation of a sociocultural perspective of learning,
which assumes the child and educator are both active participants in learning
and which relies on reflective practice

deconstructing an event so that you learn about what to keep doing, what to
change and what not to do.